

ROD TAYLOR

from hell-raiser to quiet dignity

"UNDERNEATH my phony American accent I'm still a good Aussie, a real one — my bloody oath I am."

Australian actor Rod Taylor came out fighting when I told him, during his recent visit to Sydney, that I'd heard it was his habit when in America to denigrate Australia.

"That is bloody untrue, it's a lie," he said with more than a little passion.

I believed him. I had never believed anything else, but I wanted to find out if there was any truth in the story.

Taylor came back to Australia recently to accept the first Chips Rafferty Memorial Award for achievement in the entertainment industry.

The award and the invitation to its presentation brought him back at the double, both flattered and excited. When he arrived at ATN7 to receive it, he found he was the star and/or victim of "This is Your Life."

"It was terrible," he said. "It terrified the life out of me."

"Being on 'This is Your Life' is like drowning. My whole life passed before my eyes. I was (expletive deleted) scared of who might walk out and confront me."

One of the first people to confront him was his own daughter, Felicia.

Felicia, who is 11, is the daughter of Rod's second wife, Mary Hilem. They were divorced in 1969, and Felicia lives with her mother in New York. She'd been brought to Sydney secretly to appear on the program.

A pretty blonde

Felicia wasn't with Rod when I saw him, but he had plenty to say about her. I wondered whether she was like most 11-year-old girls, or cast in the Tatum O'Neal mould.

(Tatum, who is a daughter of actor Ryan O'Neal, whom you may remember as Rodney Harrington of "Peyton Place," is a film star, and at 11, her favorite meal is caviar and champagne, and she has recently given up smoking.)

"Happily, Felicia is quite the opposite," Rod said. "She is a very nice, pretty blonde

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girl, very dignified. Much more dignified than her Dad.

"She gave me an acute attack of pride. She goes to a very good church school in New York. I must admit that her mother has done a marvellous job with her. She is a dignified, lovely little girl, and she was so patient with everyone at the party after the show."

"There were a lot of old friends about and a lot of liquor flowing."

Tough with women

The morning after, Rod looked remarkably fit. He told me he'd had to fake his drinking the night before because he knew he had a heavy day ahead.

A funny thing has happened to Rod in the last eight years.

He has changed from hell-raiser to a man who values dignity.

Twelve years ago he came to Australia to publicise "The V.I.P.s," the movie he made with Elizabeth Taylor (they call each other "Taylor"). After eight years in America he was very much the tough guy, kept in check by his then bride, Mary Hilem.

Later, when he came back again to attend the premiere of his film "The High Commissioner," he was plain unpleasant. He was flash, ready for an argument at the drop of a hat, hard on the bottle and tough with women. His conversation was definitely "R" certificate.

Today he is quiet, thoughtful, talks picturesquely, using language that any censor would pass for family consumption.

I asked what had changed him. He doesn't know. Maybe, he said, it's just the passing years and waking up to himself.

"I can fight, and I have," he said, "and there's been a lot of fighting in my pictures. But so help me I haven't hit

anybody in 20 years. I suppose the fighting goes with the language too."

"I suppose I was like that once, but it's an absurd label that I've had for a long time, and it's not right any more."

He's right, on the surface anyway.

Rod Taylor is in remarkable shape for a man of 45. He's not tall, round 175cm (5ft 9in) with very broad shoulders and no superfluous fat. He plays a lot of tennis, looks extremely fit, heavily muscled, strong.

Taylor's smile is good, and he has beautiful, even white teeth. "They're caps," he told me before I could ask. I laughed when he said it. He was so prickly about my first question that he was determined to lay everything on the line, out in the open.

Rod is very touched about winning the Chips Rafferty Memorial Award.

"I am filled with genuine pride about winning it," he said.

The award has been instituted and financed by a committee of Chips Rafferty's old friends who knew that Chips intended to set up a trust for a young actor in his will, and never got round to it.

Committee member

The award committee is made up of Sydney actor John McCallum, 20th Century-Fox's Bill Band, and movie director-producer Lee Robinson. Taylor now automatically joins the committee to choose next year's winner.

Anyone who has talked to Rod Taylor or read about him in the last ten years, knows about "Last Bus to Banjo Creek." It is the script for a film written by Lord Ted Willis and bought from him by Taylor.

Press the "Last Bus" button, and Taylor has a good description ready which he has used constantly since 1965.

"It's an Australian 'African Queen' set



on a truck with an oafish sweaty Australian truck-driver and a young English rose type passenger, who fall in love. I'm the oaf," he says.

I knew what was coming when he started to talk about Australian movies, and moved in smartly and told him I'd scream if he resurrected the "Last Bus" routine again.

He grinned. " 'Last Bus' is coming out for the 15th round I know," he said.

"But I've rewritten the script and I reckon it's great. John McCallum is keen, and because I want to do something for Australian films to prove that we can produce a film of international standard. I am going to do the picture for nothing."

I asked Rod did he think of himself as a "star."

"No I don't," he said. "I like it and feel flattered when people call me a 'star'. But I

haven't got a star image nor what it takes to get one.

"When you say 'star', I think No 1 of Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart. The only ones left today are John Wayne, and Elizabeth Taylor — now there's a star.

"But not me. I feel I am a salable commodity, and I feel I am a worthwhile salable actor and will be as long as people can be entertained by me. And I enjoy entertaining."

We had only one thing left to talk about — Taylor's love life. I wondered was it still tempestuous.

"My love life is varied, but there's not too much of it," he said. "Not rafts of girls any more, and no wives coming up or thought of. Wives are at present costing me \$US60,000 a year.

"Generally, the thought of it makes me mad, but it was worth it — every dollar —

Above: Rod Taylor with his Mum and Dad, Mr and Mrs Bill Taylor of Lidcombe, a Sydney suburb, and daughter Felicia who gives Rod "an acute attack of pride."

when the curtains opened and Felicia walked through.

"I feel that marriage is almost a passe institution today which you don't undertake unless you want a large family. If you do want a family, you act according to tradition and the old-fashioned way, and marry."

Taylor went back to America with the handsome Chips Rafferty Award in his luggage and excited about being on the 1976 judging panel.

The award is given for achievement in entertainment. It can be for writing, directing or acting in any field of entertainment — theatre, movies or TV.